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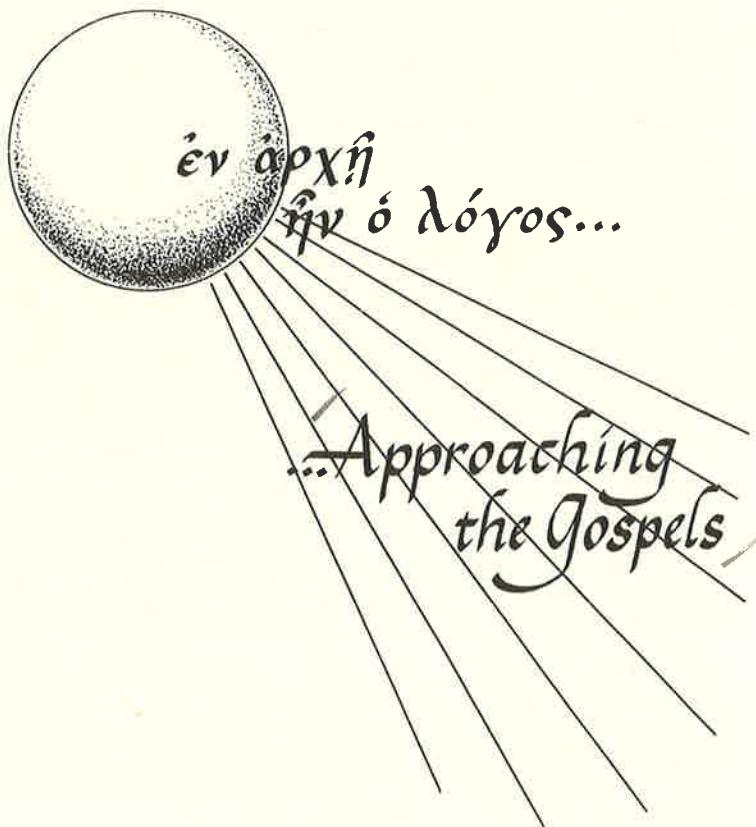
...Approaching  
the Gospels

*Mary C. Morrison*

Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 219    \$1.10

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*About the Author*/Recently retired leader of Gospels Study Groups at Pendle Hill and long-time member of Trinity Parish, Swarthmore, Mary Morrison describes herself as 49% Quaker and 51% Episcopalian. She was born in New Hampshire, brought up in Florida, educated at Smith College, and now lives in Swarthmore with her husband, Maxey, spending summers in the small house they have built in Vermont.

As a former contributing editor of *The Episcopalian*, Mary has written many articles and book reviews in addition to a book, *Jesus, Man and Master*, published in 1968 and soon to be reprinted. This is her third Pendle Hill pamphlet; the others are *William Law: Selections on the Interior Life* and *Re-conciliation: the Hidden Hyphen*.

Group study of the Gospels has had a long history at Pendle Hill, illustrating the remarkable continuity and variety that comes from personally handing on a heritage. When this Quaker study center opened nearly 50 years ago, Henry Burton Sharman came to teach the Gospels by the method of group examination and discussion which he had originated and developed. On his departure the course was taken over by his student and trainee. Dora Willson, who continued until her death in 1953. Her student and trainee, Mary Morrison—like Dora continuing the method while developing her own style—taught the course from 1957 to 1977. This pamphlet is offered in the hope of encouraging this approach at Pendle Hill and elsewhere.

Copyright © 1978 by Pendle Hill  
ISBN 0-87574-219-X  
Library of Congress catalog card number 78-51385

Printed in the United States of America by  
Sowers Printing Company, Lebanon, Pennsylvania

May 1978: 3,000

COVER DESIGN and calligraphy by Elsa P. Walberg. The Greek is from John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word."

## APPROACHING THE GOSPELS

### I

The Gospels are part of an ancient library, the collection which we call the Bible. This collection grew out of a tremendous idea, held by one small people in Asia Minor: that the Unnameable God, one, unique, the Creator of the world, had singled them out for special attention.

Their story of God's way with them is a long sequence sweeping through the centuries and making sense of all the things, good and bad, that had happened to the Hebrews in their vulnerable position within the ebb and flow of power and conquest in the Ancient World. In the widest and deepest sense of the word, this story was their myth.

*Myth* is a hard word to deal with in our literal-minded era. We tend to think in contrasting terms of fact/truth and myth/falsehood. But the truth of a myth goes far beyond the question of whether or not it represents factual accuracy. Santa Claus is a myth with a very minimal historical basis. Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King are fully historical figures who have great mythical power in our time. The truth of a myth comes from its power to make sense of events, and to breathe a meaning into them that enables individuals or a people not only to endure their experience but to embrace it and grow continually in understanding it.

Paul Tillich once said, after a visit to Athens, that no one could stand on the Acropolis without gaining a sense of how the myth of Athena, goddess of wisdom, had inspired, formed and developed the Greek mind and the Greek experience of

life. Athena—a concept, a dream, a vision, not a historical figure; what Jung calls an archetype, one of the guideline images within which and with which the human mind works.

Tillich added that the myth of Jesus Christ was the greatest myth of all. Jesus of Nazareth—a historical figure who lived and died within a certain period of time, surrounded by a certain culture, shaped by its limits, subject in all ways to the human condition. And yet also Jesus the Christ—a mysterious being so full of meaning that anyone who has really looked at him ends by asking Shakespeare's question:

“What is your substance, whereof are you made,  
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?”

That kind of compelling mystery is what gives myth its power. A myth draws us to it and makes us ask questions, eager to grasp the mystery so far as we are able. A myth does not make flat statements or spell things out; it is too rich for that. When we ask it questions, it answers; but the answers are not the same for everyone, or even for the same person at different times. A myth retains always a Delphic quality in that it speaks in answer to our questions, and our understanding of the answer depends, often drastically, on the set of mind with which we approach it.

To make things clear and sort them out is one of the strongest and most valuable human instincts. It has shaped the chaos of our experience into order, dependability and predictability. But a myth stands beyond all that, in the area of mystery, and asks of us the awe and respect that will keep it forever free to move within us, creating question, answer, and meaning.

Heinrich Zimmer in *The King and the Corpse*, his book on legends and myths, says: “They are the everlasting oracles of life. They have to be questioned and consulted anew, with every age, each age approaching them with its own variety of ignorance and understanding, its own set of problems and its

own inevitable questions. . . . The replies already given, therefore, cannot be made to serve us. The powers have to be consulted again directly—again, again, and again. Our primary task is to learn, not so much what they are said to have said, as how to approach them, evoke fresh speech from them, and understand that speech.<sup>1</sup>

So it is with the Gospels and the great myth-symbol that they present to us, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ. Our primary task is to learn, not so much what they are said to have said, as *how to approach them, evoke fresh speech from them, and understand that speech.*

## II

How to approach the Gospels? Sometimes it seems as if there were no approach left open, “what they are said to have said” stands so impenetrably in the way. So many voices have said so much about them that our ears are deafened. So many eyes have looked at them that our eyes slide over the pages as if they were slippery.

They have become a lip-service part of our culture, deadened for us before they had any chance to be alive. The worst of it is that we don’t even know what happened. We only know that our feeling about them, if we are honest enough to admit it, is a blank, undifferentiated boredom. We can be persuaded to approach them as a duty; but we cannot even hear someone who tries to tell us that they are interesting. And if some brave soul tries to tell us that they are life-giving—well, that is the same old gospel-revival language that we are already immunized against, and we tune it out automatically. The Gospels are merely Holy Writ; how can they possibly bring us

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<sup>1</sup>Ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series XI, copyright © 1948, copyright © 1957, copyright © renewed 1975 by Princeton University Press, p. 4.

any good news? What can they possibly say to us that they haven't already said when we were reluctant attenders at First Day school, or taking religion courses in college? We got the answers before we asked the questions; and now that we are asking the questions, the Gospels are almost the last place where we would think of turning for any answers.

What to do? How to break down those invisible and seemingly impassable barriers?

Well—Jesus always dealt with the crowds who gathered round him by telling them stories. Not by laying down laws or answering questions or explaining things; just telling them stories.

So we might try approaching the Gospel first of all as if it were a story. We might try reading it as we read a novel, a really good novel, the kind we give our full attention to and expect to get a great deal out of; *War and Peace*, for instance; or *The Brothers Karamazov*; or Camus' *La Peste*; or Jane Austen's *Emma*.

What goes into reading a novel? We bring to it what Coleridge called "a willing suspension of disbelief." That is, we are not checking it out analytically against standards other than its own. We do not read it as fact if it is clearly fantasy, or prose-thinking if it is poetic, or tragedy if it is comedy. We give a novel the latitude it needs to say in its own chosen way what it wants to say to us. We enter its world, and let that world be slowly, gradually created round us, beginning with the first sentence of the first chapter. We interact with it.

Suppose, for instance, we open a novel and it begins, "Harry walked down the snowy street, looking in the shop windows." Immediately the questions begin. Who's Harry? Where is he? In a city? Maybe. Clearly not open country, anyway. When is all this? Winter? What century?

So we read on, carrying our questions with us. And perhaps the next paragraph mentions that the dresses in the shop

windows have bustles on the back, and we begin to get an idea of the period. Perhaps the next page says that Harry is on his way to his law office; or that he is cold because his shoes have holes in their soles. We begin to learn a little about who he is; and we read on, asking more questions and finding more answers.

Now for the opening of Mark's account: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Here it is, Holy Writ—and immediately our minds go blank and all questions cease. We've heard it before, and we know the answers. But do we really? Suppose we read it as if for the first time, and as if it were a novel about Harry. Questions break out. Who's Jesus? Is "Christ" a title, or his last name? What on earth does it mean to call him Son of God, and in capitals at that? What's this word "gospel" that we never meet anywhere but here, and therefore (if we are reading as if for the first time) have never met before? Suddenly we realize that in that whole introductory sentence there is only one word that we understand, "beginning."

So OK, here we are at the beginning, and we realize that, as with any story, we have the whole sweep of what is to come in it to develop our curiosity and answer our questions, to let the theme grow and speak to us as it wants to.

### III

Now begins the second stage of our process: to evoke fresh speech from this Gospels material. We already know it too well, as we have seen. Even if we think we have never paid any attention to it, the words and themes are worn threadbare in our minds by centuries of everyday use in our culture.

The words have lost or changed their meaning. Take the word "minister," for instance. It was originally used to translate the Greek word "diakonos," meaning servant. But

now when we hear the word, we think of an authority figure whom others serve.

Or take "Gospel." Does it have a meaning? Isn't it just the name of those four books? We are surprised and think it a bit gimmicky when a new translation of them comes out on the supermarket shelf with a title that begins, "GOOD NEWS." And yet that is exactly what the word "Gospel" means; it translates the Greek word "evangelion." EU = good, angelion + message; good message, good news.

Since this story was first written down, many of its key words have radically changed their meaning, not only through linguistic wear and tear, but also because the concepts that these words try to express are so foreign to ordinary, everyday human thought that tradition cannot pass them on. We each have to learn and continually re-learn them for ourselves through long experience of living with them, and living them.

Those concepts! And the words that try to express them! Faith. Sin. Forgiveness. Glory. Kingdom of God. Righteousness. Love—even love, the word we think we know best. When we try to grasp them, they slide away like watermelon seeds and leave us looking blankly around for what has disappeared. But perhaps we are in worse shape when we think that we have succeeded in defining them, for then we are casting in concrete what is meant to be a living experience, renewed daily.

Fortunately the well-spring of the Gospels is still here, still offering us the life and freshness of the original experience.

For those large-concept words there is help at hand in the many new and brilliant translations of the texts that have come out during this century. Some, like the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, and the Good News Bible, are the work of committees and groups. Others are the work of individuals: James Moffatt, J. B. Phillips, Ronald Knox, Clarence Jordan. Any of these sepa-

rately can bring the language to new life; and some or all of them, used together, can by their diversity set our minds to working. There are editions of the New Testament that set several translations side by side: one put out by the magazine, *Christianity Today*, that includes four, and another from Creation House that offers six.

Most of these new translations come in modern paragraphing and punctuation, complete with quotation-marks to indicate direct speech and dialogue. No one not brought up on the old format can fully appreciate, for instance, how much more direct and personal the Word of God is when it appears within quotation-marks; a small thing but very important.

The new texts do all they can for us; but fleshing out the dry bones of the concepts remains our job, and it is one that turns out to be a pleasure once we learn how to do it.

One way is to follow through on the discipline of reading as if for the first time, to the extent of pretending that each of the over-familiar words, faith, love, and so forth, is written in an unknown language. We have no idea what it means. We are foreigners intelligently trying to learn new words by the contexts in which they appear. It is a real exercise to take the word "faith," for instance, assuming no knowledge whatever of its meaning, and follow it through all its appearances in, say, the Gospel of Mark, gradually building up from the text itself a sense of the word's active and dynamic operation in the mind of Jesus. Or, better still, to do the same thing with all of the first three Gospels in one of the parallel-arrangement editions, Nelson's *Gospel Parallels* or H. B. Sharman's *Records of the Life of Jesus*, which set the texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke side by side on each page for easy comparison, thus encouraging these closely-related but divergent Gospels to interact with one another in our minds.

A dictionary can be helpful too, particularly one that gives the history and origins of words and so opens up their

overtones and undertones and all their possible meanings. A dictionary search can be especially rewarding if the word derives from Greek or Latin, because of their close relation to the earliest forms of our Gospels. And if the word-derivation dares to risk going still further back it can turn up such startling insights as that the word "truth" is related to the word "tree"—a comparison that calls up a host of images. In the dictionary, as in our search through the different Gospels contexts in which a word appears, we are looking for its poetry, its living, active meaning.

The greatest help of all, however, is to assemble a group of interested people and look at the Gospels together, not as the merely literary "we" of the sentences above, but as the real "we" of a variety of individual minds thinking together. The different points of view represented even in a homogeneous group can be truly astounding. It is a real mind-stretcher to be one of a group engaged in frank and open looking-at and talking-about the Gospels. A dual process takes place. On the one hand, we come to see the great variety of insights which the texts contain; and on the other we come to a genuine respect for the many different points of view from which they can be legitimately and honestly seen.<sup>2</sup>

What we are working at, privately or in a group, is the business of turning what is for most of us dead and empty doctrine into living meaning that will grow in our hearts and give direction to our lives. We are encouraging the word/Word to speak to us.

All the great religious teachers say with one voice that to meet the living truth, we must let it come to us and speak to us *where we are*. We must be faithful to the text and to ourselves—to quote from Harold Goddard in his book on

<sup>2</sup>For information on how to start such a group and what to do in it, see appendix.

Shakespeare. Dr. Goddard goes on: "The text must be as sacred to the reader as his facts are to the scientist. He must discard instantly anything it contradicts. But he must be as ready to strike life into it, from his own experience, as a scientist must be fertile in hypotheses."<sup>3</sup>

"As sacred . . . as facts." This should dispel any notion—if we ever had one—that our reading of the Gospel can be merely a springboard into the fantasy of what we would like to hear or what we want to be encouraged to think.

As we re-sensitize ourselves to read freshly, we must be prepared to collide with many events and sayings that we will not like at all. "This is terrible!" we will say. "It would be awful to have to think this! He can't really be saying that!" But he is; and our task at this point is to separate out what actually lies on the page from our reaction to it. First we must see as clearly as we can what is being said; then react to it.

The central character of this story is out to shock us, disturb us, upset us, as he does the people in the story; and the question, with us as with them, is, how do we react to being disturbed? Will we be antagonized and refuse to listen? Or will we feel an inner stir of excitement, and open our minds?

If we come to the Gospels as we would approach a meeting with our most interesting, challenging, and sometimes exasperating friend, we'll be on the right path for a real meeting with their central character. If we bring our full, fresh attention in the kind of open response that we would have available for the person we most want to talk to—a letter of vital importance—a book we can't wait to read—we will hold real conversation with the Gospels, and let them read us while we are reading them.

Then they will speak fresh speech to us.

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<sup>3</sup>*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, copyright 1951 by University of Chicago Press, p. 12.

## IV

And now, how to understand that speech?

In reading a novel we find it easy and natural to adjust to the author's biases, background, and technique. We read *Emma*. Instantly we are in 18th-century England with all its prejudices and limitations (that we have outgrown) and its spaciousness (that we have lost). As we read we are not supposed to fret about the condition of the lower classes, the position of women, or the fact that none of the main characters seem to do an honest day's work; that kind of consciousness came later in history. We are supposed to let our thought move freely in a well-bred and gracious society, in which a wide range of human interaction is expressed not in passion, violence, or deep introspection, but in the nuance of a tiny turn of phrase. If we fail to make these mental adjustments we will miss the whole story.

The same process is required of us in all our reading. Even though Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is history, not fiction, we still must move our minds back into the eighteenth century if we are to see accurately what the book is and is not saying.

But we lose sight of this requirement when we read the Bible. We have made almost a virtue of taking Holy Writ absolutely straight, as if its sentences were propositions in geometry, or more elementary still,  $2+2=4$ . "It says *this*," we are told, "and *this* is what it means, no more, no less. It's a sin to juggle the word of God."

Now I too believe that it is the word of God. But to me the real sin lies in assuming that God always speaks in flat linear statements and never in poetry or fiction or riddles or jokes or dreams or anecdotes or folktales or drama.

The Hebrew Bible as a whole, that ancient library, needs a wide cataloguing system to include the tremendous variety of

its contents. Legend — lawbooks — history — biography — fiction — poetry. The Gospels, coming as they do out of that rich variety, hold it all in miniature. We will do them much less than justice if we assume that the same way of speaking, the same literary method, is always operating. We must read with a literary accuracy and integrity that will seek first of all the author's intention; and we must call up the mental acuity and agility to understand and work within that intention.

As readers of the Hebrew Bible we commit a second sin when we assume that God created those fine delicate responsive instruments, human beings, and went to all the trouble of developing the most responsive of them into the speakers-forth, the prophets, only to use them as simple dictating-machines. The fabric of prophecy is woven in a much more complicated way than that.

Similarly in reading the Gospels we are dealing with human beings, products of their own time and place, exhausting their range of thought and language to express the inexpressible as it speaks to them in their particular setting.

The author of Luke begins his account with a very valuable description of what sources he is using, whom he is addressing, and what he intends to do. (Luke 1:1-4) He has been gathering up the written accounts; he has talked with some eyewitnesses; and he will put all this material into manageable order for the benefit of those (symbolized by the name "Theophilus = Lover of God") who have found their way to the Good News and would like to know more. Already we know one thing: we are to approach this story not from a distance but as if we were already inside it; it will not speak to us if we stand outside its circle arguing. We can sense too that this Gospel will be rich in varied material, and that its point of view will be inclusive, rather than exclusive.

The introduction to Mark we have already seen; it is laconic, spare and uncompromising; and so (with a few garrulous

exceptions) is Mark's Gospel, centering more on action than speech, and dealing with the mystery of what it means that "Son of Man," a human being, is "Son of God."

Matthew's introduction is a genealogy of Jesus, beginning not with Adam, ancestor of all human beings, as Luke's genealogy does, but with Abraham, ancestor of the Hebrew people. It is the gospel most rooted in Hebrew tradition and in Old Testament prophetic "fulfillment"—a word to be taken not factually but poetically, as invoking many meanings and possibilities.

John we will look at later.

Whatever their individual variations (which are often great) in style, point of view, and content, the strongest impression that the first three give is of a central core of similarity out of which a central character speaks with consistency and power: Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, Son of Man, Son of God.

And this Jesus—what is his substance, whereof is he made? He is first of all a Jew, steeped in the Hebrew tradition, trained in its methods of thought and its codes of action, thinking deeply about the meaning of its history. Second, he is a genuine radical, one who turns back to the roots of his tradition in order to bring forth what grows continually green and fresh in it. Third, he is a challenger of all that is rigid and corrupt in his tradition.

These facts are so important that they can hardly be over-emphasized. They mean that if we are to understand his speech we must come with a Hebrew Bible in our hand, ready to look into the sources of his thought whenever we find (as we shall again and again) a reference that takes us back into his tradition. We must be ready to move within the deeply-ingrained Biblical habit of thinking and acting in symbols and speaking in paradox and parable. We must feel our way into the ingrained Hebrew sense of Covenant, the conviction of being a People chosen to understand and fulfill God's purpose.

We must learn to accept as basic to the story the deep respect for Torah, the Law, that underlies the thought of both Jesus and his antagonists.

We must also have at least the bare bones of factual knowledge about the situation in which and to which Jesus was speaking. First-century Palestinian Judaism was a religion/nation guided by a dream. A small country, occupied by the Romans but dedicated to the service of God, it remembered its freedom and power under God's own anointed King David, and looked for another Anointed One who would lead it into a renewed freedom and power.

In that small country, full of the comings and goings of all the peoples of the Roman Empire, pressed upon by all the temptations of those varied cultures, they lived, a people of God who had been told that through all their wanderings they must keep themselves and their tradition pure and holy. "A stiff-necked people," God called them—stubborn and rigid and unable to listen to reason or compromise; but also full of determination and staying-power and undying endurance. No wonder God chose them. They held out against the pressures of time and place in the first century as they had throughout their history.

Many aspects of our twentieth-century experience stand in our way as we read all this. We are not a People of the Law, in fact we tend, with our recent frontier history, to take the law into our own hands. We have no strong sense of being a People; we are more like a gathering of individuals. A phrase like "the Kingdom of God" has little spontaneous value for us children of the American revolution. We have theories of health and disease, we hold social and political values that are vastly different from those of Jesus' time. We know much more about history, science, politics and economics than first-century Palestinians; and much less about images and poetry and the art of finding meaning in our experience. Compared to the people who stood round Jesus and listened as he talked, we who read

are college graduates in some ways and kindergarteners in others.

When we have made the mental adjustments we need in order to read what is actually on the page, we can see that while Jesus lives fully within his time and space, he also transcends it and can speak to us across the distances and the years that stand between him and us. He is indeed, as he consistently called himself, "Son of Man," *anthropos*, a human being. In that sense not exclusively a Jew, he can speak to the whole world. In that sense not exclusively a male, he can speak to the whole human race, transcending the male-female cultural and psychological structures as perhaps no one else ever has. In that sense not a first-century Palestinian, he can speak to all centuries and all countries. Because he is *anthropos*, a human being, he can speak to and for us all from the common depth that underlies all the cultural differences.

The wonder is that he could speak with an *anthropos*-voice at all in such a time of tension, defensiveness, resistance and sometimes open revolt. But he did, and does, and in so doing he brings us the assurance that the *anthropos*-voice can be spoken and heard in any time, however difficult—even our own, if we will stop to listen.

## V

Jesus speaks with all the strengths and skills of his tradition: paradox; parable; the sense of the Torah; the sense of the truth; the sense of belonging to a coherent whole, both socially and intellectually; the authority of chosen-ness.

To take paradox first:

The famous saying at the heart of the Gospels, "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it; and whoever loses it will save it, and live." (Luke 17:33 NEB) is sometimes called the Great Paradox. It is a first-class illustration of what a paradox is; or,

to make a definition by action, of what a paradox does. We read it; our minds are stretched two ways by the contradiction within it. No resolution is possible by any of the normal laws of logic and linear thinking; but the words carry a kind of teasing attraction, and our minds begin to work away at them like a dog gnawing a bone.

And that's a paradox! That's what it is and what it does.

Much of the great teaching of the world has been in paradox-form. The Buddha said, "I will show you sorrow and the ending of sorrow." Confucius said, "To reform the outer world, turn inward." Zen Buddhist teaching bases itself on this kind of brain-teaser, out of a firmly-held principle that all other ways of learning merely fill the teacup of the mind so full that nothing of living value stands a chance of being added. The mind must be startled and teased into emptiness before it can let anything new burst in.

Paradox-teaching holds that out of this bafflement and consequent shattering of the old concepts, a total rearrangement takes place, something like what happens to the design in a kaleidoscope as it is turned. A fresh picture of the world, of oneself, of life, emerges—not out of the usual human either/or choice-tension, but in an instantaneous fusion of both/and.

The Great Paradox itself seems to demand of us a total rearrangement of our concept of life. If we let this mind-teaser have its way with us, life becomes not something that we own and take for granted, but a mystery constantly moving and calling to us to follow where it leads—not looking back—carrying our cross (whatever that means), and trusting the mysterious process even into death and beyond.

A paradox is probably the most revolutionary form of thinking there is; it turns everything upside down. And it may also be the most conservative form of teaching there is, because if we let this disturbing upside-down process take

place inside our heads, we are not likely to act violently in the world around us. We will have a new creative center from which to work, and our outward acts will grow, whole and beautiful, from the root of that inward newness. Confucius' paradox may be hinting at such a process.

Jesus used many paradoxes:

“The first shall be last, and the last, first.”

“Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.”

“Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.”

“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Even what look at first like laws come out paradoxically too, in the “You have heard . . . but I say” sequences of the Sermon on the Mount, teasing us and asking us questions where we might have expected the old  $2 + 2 = 4$  approach.

Underlying all these particular mind-blowers is a general paradox basic to Jesus' teaching: that all our ideas of good fortune—to be rich, happy, powerful, full of food and laughter—somehow get in our way and make us get in other people's way. “Whoever seeks to save his life . . .” about sums it up. No wonder it is called the Great Paradox.

Parable and paradox are related because they share the same indirect and challenging teaching method. We cannot take a parable linearly; we cannot reason it out. For modern readers, perhaps the best way of approaching one would be to ask, “If this were a joke, what would be its point?” And we would wait for that point to fly at us like an arrow, and if we were lucky it would hit the target of where we are, and we would laugh.

Nobody really knows why we laugh. Books contain elaborate explanations. My own theory is that in laughing we respond to neatness and economy and speed of thought; we enjoy it as we do a good shot in a tennis match. It turns out

right! And we exult in laughter.

As with a joke, if we truly "get" a parable, our first impulse is to laugh. Is—or should be. Impulses to laugh do not often stir in us when we read Holy Writ; we stifle them before they can reach consciousness.

Fortunately parables are part of nearly every religious tradition. Reading the unfamiliar ones may freshen our approach. Three good collections have been translated into English: *Tales of the Hasidim*; *101 Zen Stories*; and *Tales of the Dervishes*. We are inwardly free to laugh as we read them; and they will teach us to begin laughing again at and with a fourth collection, our own, the stories Jesus told.

Parables, like jokes, not only amuse us; they also jolt us. They crack our closed minds open. As Sallie TeSelle says, "If the listener or reader 'learns' what the parable has to 'teach' . . . it is more like a shock to the nervous system than it is like a piece of information to be stored in the head."<sup>4</sup> Parables put together two things that we never thought of relating. Or they place familiar things in a wholly new setting. Or they illuminate an unfamiliar thing by the light of a familiar one. They are out to shock us, and they do.

Nothing whatever can happen between us and the parable unless we respond to it with our whole nervous system; unless we enter into its story and let it move us from one place to another in our thinking; unless we let it blow our minds. Jesus says, "If you have ears, then hear," And he is right. Not even the *anthropos*-voice can shout loud enough to make us hear unless we are ready to listen.

So we are to let the parables move our minds into a new dimension of thought, a light and even graceful seriousness that is for the mind what dancing is for the body.

It is not easy, however, for either Jesus or the crowds to

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<sup>4</sup>*Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 122.

which he speaks to move lightly among the matters of the Law; they are the People of the Torah, whose trust is in the word of Moses. Many of the clashes between Jesus and his critics center on this theme, for his thought about Law is deeper and more complex than theirs. No one can say that he slavishly obeyed the law; no one can say, either, that he disregarded it. His relation to it is best summed up by a passage not found in our New Testament but available in an early text of Luke: "Seeing someone working on the sabbath, he said to him, 'Man, if indeed you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are cursed and a transgressor of the law.' "<sup>5</sup> "Know what you are doing!" It is a frightening demand, but one that Jesus makes of us throughout the Gospels.

Another area of total seriousness for Jesus is Truth. His opponents hardly share that concern; much study of the law has made of them, according to the accounts, a group of casuists. Jesus is grimmer and more uncompromising about this than anything else in all his teaching. The great sin against the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, is to be a hypocrite—to twist reality to suit our needs and wishes, to fool ourselves and others about anything. It is a sin against the eye that sees, the **mind that knows, a betrayal at the center of our being.** "Blind guides," Jesus calls the casuists, and he is right.

A sense of prophecy grows naturally out of a concern for truth and is Jesus' third area of deep thought and vigorous speaking-forth. The prophets were giants of Hebrew tradition, and Jesus has clearly read them often and thoughtfully.

What is a prophet? A foreteller of the future, we tend to think. But prophecy goes deeper than that. The Hebrew prophets were first of all acute observers and forth-tellers of their own times. They spoke forth what they saw God seeing in

<sup>5</sup>*Gospel Parallels*, ed. Burton H. Throckmorton (New York: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1949), p. 51.

a present situation, often predicting the immediate future that would grow out of this closely-observed present. Because they could see so deeply into their own time, they described a basic and recurrent human pattern that future readers could see as applying to their own time as well. Jesus was a prophet in this same tradition, reading the signs of his times for all time.

Here he had help from his culture that we do not have. In our language past, present, and future are distinct; in Hebrew thought they blend and coalesce with a poetic freedom that is hard for us to grasp. Some linguistic scholars claim that the concepts a culture holds are conditioned by the way its language is put together. Hebrew has two verb-tenses, one indicating uncompleted, the other completed, action. This structure makes possible a free-wheeling time-sense in which past can be present, and present can be future, with hardly a break in the thought. In contrast, our language and the Greek in which the Gospels first came to us have strongly time-bound verbs.

When we are trying to grasp Jesus' thought, we would sometimes do well to leave out the concept of time entirely and look for the timeless pattern that underlies the verb-tenses of our texts. For instance, it can be a rewarding exercise to translate the time-structured "Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied." (Luke 6:21 RSV) into the Yin-Yang timelessness of "Being hungry is the other half of being filled."

Another feature of Hebrew language and thought is the ease with which a noun can refer, almost in the same sentence, to an individual and to a nation. "Israel" can mean "our father Jacob" one minute, and the next, the whole nation descended from Jacob. In Isaiah the "servant of Jahweh" moves, with an ease that bewilders us, from being an individual to being a whole nation, and back again. We in our time have a strong sense of separateness, even of conflict, between the individual

and the group; but for Jesus there was no such dividing-line. He moved within this coalescence of individual/group like its own child, as he was; and out of it he came to call himself Son of Man—the individual who is one of, fully part of, and represents, the human race.

Kingdom of God is Jesus' fourth theme. It includes and sums up all the rest. It is made up of paradoxes and expressed in parables. It includes the law and the prophets. It is both individual and social. It is past, present and future all in one. It fully embodies the triad of concepts that guided him: chosenness, servanthood, and relationship to God.

In developing the fullness of the Kingdom's meaning for him, Jesus uses all the tools of thought that he possesses; uses them—exhausts them—goes beyond them—to express the inexpressible.

And we as we read will be close to the heart of these Gospels if we in turn use and exhaust all our tools and mental resources to evoke from what he says about the Kingdom the fresh speech that will illuminate and fill with meaning our own times and thoughts and lives. For just as Jesus wanted the people of first-century Palestine to live in and be the Kingdom of their time, so he wants us to live in and be the Kingdom of our time.

## VI

Nothing gives a clearer indication of the difference between the Fourth Gospel and the other three than comparing the introductions to Luke and John. Luke's preface introduces a work that is clearly intended to be a narrative: straightforward, businesslike, comprehensive. But the Prologue to John, what does it introduce? Words almost fail us, but we can try. What will this Gospel be *doing*? Surprising phrases come to mind. It will move within the areas of poetry, meditation, music. It will go out of this world; it will come into this world from

the space beyond it or the depth within it.

John is like poetry in the way it presents its facts, reporting them briskly, clearly, vividly (no other Gospeler tells a story so well) and then moves with energy and grace into exploring the feeling aroused by the story and the meaning it contains. The word "sign" as it appears in John hints at this process. A strongly negative word in the first three Gospels, "sign" in John carries the simple meaning of a sign by the roadside; it points to something beyond itself. These beautifully told stories are signs; and the reader who looks beyond them, following the author-poet's pointing finger, will come to the poetic and meditative truth of their meaning.

For instance, chapter 6 of John begins with a small story, complete with vivid detail and brisk conversation, about the multiplying of a few loaves of bread into an amount that will feed five thousand people. The story is a "sign", and we are invited to follow the pointing finger into a meditation on the true Bread of Life. Modern readers have trouble with the literary device that presents this meditation and others like it as spoken by Jesus himself. We take it all as flat fact (as if a tape-recorder had been there) and find the statements megalomaniac—forgetting that they are poetry, meditation, in which *meaning* is the goal and all kinds of literary techniques are put to work toward its development. A mental exercise might help: every time Jesus says "I am" the life—the bread—the truth—the way—we might think of the author as saying, "At this point I looked at him and said in my heart, 'You are the life—the bread—the truth—the way.' "

This exercise can free us from our literalism and help us move into the heart of John's meditation, in Chapter 8. There the phrase I AM moves in a sweep of imagery all the way from the simple *ego eimi* ("it's me") of Greek idiom to the great I AM of Jahweh in the burning bush—and presents this full range as Jesus' consciousness of himself. This is not a portrait

of megalomania; it is a meditation on human nature and on the promise made in the Prologue that human beings can indeed, by looking at the full meaning of Jesus, receive "the right to become the children of God," and partake of his I AM, his being. And this in its turn is not megalomania; for though John more than all the other Gospels makes Jesus a mighty and commanding figure, John more than all the other Gospels stresses Jesus' derivativeness and dependence upon God. "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees his Father doing . . . I can do nothing on my own authority . . . I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me." (John 5:19, 30 RSV) If we partake of this I AM, we too will move in freedom and power within our dependence on God.

The Fourth Gospel is like music in the way it develops its themes. There is no use expecting its thought to move in straight-forward, linear fashion like a piece of expository writing. That way lies confusion; but there is another way. We can get close to John's ways of statement by thinking of a quartet or a symphony. A theme is stated. It is dropped and another one is stated; then a third. Then theme A recurs, phrased a little differently in the light of what has happened in between. Then B and C may play a kind of duet. Then all three are gathered together in some kind of resolution, and theme D is introduced. And so on, until at the end everything is gathered together in a glorious summation and consummation.

This same musical process works upon the words that appear in the Prologue and again in the final prayer of Jesus in chapter 17. Word . . . light . . . life . . . world . . . truth . . . glory . . . Father . . . made known: in the beginning and at the end they are the same. But in between comes all the power of the music-of-ideas, blending and developing the themes to a point where the words of the ending have acquired overtones and resonances that could only be guessed at in the words of the beginning.

John is the work of a writer whose central image and music come from an inner reality. "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23 RSV adapted) This poet, this meditator, this musician, has loved Jesus, "kept his word", and freely given the risen Christ his only real home, the human heart. Speaking first as the resistant crowds of chapters 1-12 and then as the receptive disciples of chapters 13-17, he says to Jesus, as Jacob said to the angel, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

And he has made the blessing that he received available to us. How can life, life itself, be transmitted by the printed page? It seems impossible; and yet it seems to happen as we read the Fourth Gospel. Its author is mediator for the Mediator. He speaks only the words that he has heard in his heart as spoken by the one who says, "The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (John 14:24, RSV) And the words which we hear are spirit and life.

## VII

"No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18, RSV). My own preferred translation of that final phrase—and I think the Greek would bear it—is "he has *said* him". As J. B. Phillips paraphrases John 1:1, "At the beginning, God expressed himself." The Son—child of humankind, child of God, in a maturity of being that makes the two terms merge into one harmonious whole—is that expression, that Word; and the Word expresses, or says, the Father, our Father. And that inexpressible process is expressed by and in the Gospels, more and more, as we learn more and more how to hear what they say.

## APPENDIX: GOSPELS STUDY GROUP PROCEDURE

The first essential in starting a Gospels study group and keeping it going is a person who is eager and seriously interested. If you are that person, here is what you do:

1. *Membership.* Hold firmly to the concept that this is a *group* activity, in which the important elements are not the learning and expertise of one specialist or even a general level of prior knowledge, but the ease and openness with which the individuals within the group interact, and approach the Gospel material. With this in mind, begin to inquire around for people who might be interested in taking a fresh look at the subject. Groups can vary in size comfortably from six to sixteen—large enough for variety of insights, small enough for freedom of expression.

2. *Leadership.* It is tremendously helpful to have a leader skilled in group work, and specifically with the Gospels. However, your group can proceed adequately with one learner/leader; or with a pair who work up the material together and alternate leadership; or with rotating leadership. The important thing for a leader is not to have answers, but to know how to ask questions—how to keep the discussion focussed on the text and moving along at a steady pace; how to encourage all possible points of view; how to keep the more vocal members from dominating the group.

3. *Group procedure.* Group members should feel a responsibility to listen to one another, to express themselves as openly, freshly, briefly, and as much to the point as possible; and to encourage others to do the same. In their dealings with the text, they should maintain openness and encourage freshness by trying to read as if for the first time (this will put everyone, oldtimers and newcomers alike, on an equal footing) and by not bringing in any outside baggage such as doctrine, or even commentaries on the texts. There should be no coercion

of any kind; the group is not trying to reach conclusions, but to open, vitalize and enlarge the thinking of each individual within it.

4. *Schedule.* A weekly meeting is desirable, if possible. It is a good idea to set meetings up in short units at first—not more than four weeks, or at the most ten. Regular year-long study will develop naturally if the group goes well.

5. *Questions.* This pamphlet has already presented some general idea of the kinds of questions that are profitable to ask of the texts. I hope to produce within the next year a supplementary booklet of questions designed for use in Gospel study groups.

6. *Texts.* Two books are very helpful. *Records of the Life of Jesus*, by Henry Burton Sharman, is a very handy arrangement in parallel columns of the first three Gospels, with John separately at the back. There is also *Exploring the Mind of Jesus*, by Phelps and Willmott, a helpful putting-together within one cover of selections from the texts, questions on the selections, and pointers on group procedure. Both books are available from Pendle Hill.

And so, good luck. May you have much enjoyment and enlightenment.

#### PROCEDURES: TO GROUP DISCUSSION LEADERS\*

As discussion leader your job is to help the group mobilize its own resources and direct these to attack the problem at hand. Sole responsibility for the successful functioning of the group does not rest upon you; your responsibilities are actually rather limited. You are not responsible for the conclusions reached by the group; you are not even responsible for seeing that the group reaches a conclusion. Your job is simply to see that all the important points, facts and viewpoints are brought out, in order that the group may reach as full an understanding of the subject as possible.

*Some specific points of leadership are:*

1. Have a definite outline and procedure in mind (or on paper) and follow it, but not so rigidly as to lose a promising lead.
2. Be ready with questions to meet the developing interest of the group. Avoid questions that can be answered simply by a 'yes' or 'no'.
3. Hold the attention of the group to the material or theme directly under discussion. Do not permit ranging to other areas of thought.
4. Move the discussion along: see that the thinking keeps progressing. When 'everything has been said' or a certain point has been sufficiently covered lead the group on to the next point. On the other hand, there may be cases in which the group should be held from moving along too fast, for example from making a hasty decision before all the facts are clearly seen. It is not necessary for the group to have reached agreement in order for the time to have arrived for the discussion to move forward. Group conclusions as an outcome are less important than that the process of discussion be open-minded, thorough, frank, and outspoken.
5. From time to time make summaries: indicate the trend of the discussion, the agreements reached, the significant differences

\*Adapted from *Processes of Group Thinking*, by Earl Willmott.

of opinion. This will bring to many members surer satisfaction that results have been reached, and will give them something more definite to take away as an outcome of the discussion.

6. Encourage all possible points-of-view. If there is a distinct difference of opinion in the group—a conflict—be sure that neither side feels that it has been unfairly treated. See that all significant aspects of both sides have been represented. Be careful not to force your own opinions. Do not guide the discussion to any prior or externally-chosen end. Do not keep the group from deciding on what you think is wrong. *Trust the group.*
7. Hesitate to talk much. The leader's job is to get others to talk.
8. Never be afraid of silence. Silence may be sterile, but it may indicate a need for careful thought. If you are sure the question has been understood, give the group plenty of time to think.
9. Be sure that the members of the group know one another. Keep using names of members when referring to anyone's contribution to the thinking. Take time at the beginning for introductions.
10. Enlist as many members of the group in the discussion as possible, and encourage them to begin as early as possible.

#### PROCEDURES: TO MEMBERS OF DISCUSSION GROUPS\*

Group thinking is the process by which a group arrives at an understanding or a decision. Group thinking produces something that members individually cannot produce—it creates a group idea that may be better than the best individual idea or all the individual ideas added together. The means by which this group thinking is carried on is the method of discussion. Discussion differs from argument and debate. An argument takes place when minds are already made up and each side wishes to convince its opponents of its soundness. A debate is a controversy around one proposed solution where each side desires to convince the hearers that it is right. A discussion is the process whereby a group of individuals seek together for conviction as to the best solution to some problem, and where individuals are not sure before hand what the outcome of their own or the group's thinking will be.

##### *Suggestions to Group Members*

1. Maintain an attitude of *searching* for a solution. You are not trying to convince anyone of an opinion—you are trying to find the best answer.
2. Listen to learn. Do not be thinking up what to say next while *others are speaking and so miss their contributions.*
3. Avoid the use of stereotyped phraseology. (This is especially important in discussion of religious subjects.) Clothe thought in different and fresh words.
4. Participate. Contribute your idea. Do not hold back an idea because it seems to you incomplete—it may be just the idea that the group needs in order to move ahead.
5. Say what you really think. "Say what you have to say, not what you ought." Do not speak to please anyone. Be honest. Do not allow anything permanently to pass unchallenged which makes you rebellious.

\*Adapted from *Processes of Group Thinking* by Earl Willmott.

6. Talk to the point. Do not start off on a different track unless you feel sure that doing so will throw light on the problem.
7. Try to hold your preconceptions in abeyance. Be on guard against the influence of your own bias. This will prove to be a difficult discipline but highly rewarding.
8. Talk briefly. Say what you have to say and stop. Give the other members as much chance to talk as you have had. Sometimes refrain from speaking, to encourage the more hesitant.
9. Be on the lookout for evidence that will change your mind. Do not hesitate to say that you have changed your mind, if you have.
10. Be sympathetic toward the opinion of another *as opinion*. If you think it in error, be eager to follow it until it corrects itself, rather than try yourself to correct it directly and promptly.

A SUGGESTED LIBRARY FOR GOSPELS STUDY

1. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, Expanded Edition, Revised Standard Version: an Ecumenical Study Bible. Oxford University Press, New York, 1977. Sometimes called the Common Bible because of its wide acceptance, this is probably the most useful Bible for group and individual study.
2. *Good News Bible*: The Bible in Today's English Version. American Bible Society, New York, 1976. A readable and down-to-earth new translation with notes and line drawings that add greatly to its effectiveness. A valuable supplement to #1.
3. *The Torah*: The Five Books of Moses, a new translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the traditional Hebrew text. Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1962. Another valuable supplement to #1, offering a non-Christian perspective that is broadening and helpful.
4. *God and History in the Old Testament*. By Harvey Guthrie. Allenson, 1960. An overview of the different strands of thought woven into the Hebrew Bible, and how they carry over into the New Testament.
5. *Good News for Everyone*: How to use the Good News Bible. By Eugene A. Nida. Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1977. An insight into the many problems involved in translating the Bible fully and freshly into modern English.
6. *Can We Trust the New Testament?* by John A. T. Robinson. Eerdmans 1977. A description for the general reader of what this past century of New Testament critical study has accomplished, and where we are now in enabling the text to speak openly and directly to us.
7. *Jesus of Nazareth*. By Gunther Bornkamm. Harper and Row, 1960. A fine example of the kind of scholarship described in Robinson's book above.
8. *Speaking in Parables: a Study in Metaphor and Theology*. By Sallie TeSelle. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1975. A stimulating and refreshing book that opens the parables of Jesus and the metaphor of his life to the possibility of new and evergrowing insight.
9. A good Bible Dictionary. The ones put out by Harper and Row and by Westminster will give you background information on any Biblical subject in readily accessible, alphabetically arranged form.
10. A Concordance geared to whatever version of the Bible you use most often.

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